

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
PALMA WILSON

MAY 15, 1990

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1990-1

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HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Harry S Truman National Historic Site. After a draft of this transcript was made, the park provided a copy to the interviewee and requested that he or she return the transcript with any corrections or modifications that he or she wished to be included in the final transcript. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff member, also reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewee and interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. The transcript follows as closely as possible the recorded interview, including the usual starts, stops, and other rough spots in typical conversation. The reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

Palma Wilson and Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. Their corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2000. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

RESTRICTION

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ABSTRACT

The interview begins in the park headquarters with Wilson discussing her years in the park as lead park ranger (1984-1988) and chief ranger (1988-1990) and the development of the interpretive program. The interview continued with Wilson's opinions about the challenges facing her successor and her views about what makes Harry S Truman National Historic Site a unique unit in the National Park System. Palma Wilson ends with a discussion in the living room, foyer, and music room in the Truman home much as if she were giving a guided tour of these areas of the home.

Persons mentioned: Norman J. Reigle, Thomas P. Richter, Steve Harrison, Joan Sanders, Sue Kopczynski, Lisa Bosso Houston, Jennifer a. Hayes, Cindy Ott, Rick Jones, Karen Tinnin, Jody Adkins, John Whitfield, Chrissy Barker, Skip Brooks, Linda Joseph, Sue Gentry, May Wallace, Ardis Haukenberry, Chris Ryan, Elizabeth Safly, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Russell Dickinson, Margaret Truman Daniel, Jerry Schoeber, Sandra Day O'Connor, Jay Wesley Jacobs, David McCullough, Ronald Mack, Brian Hoduski, Mike Gillespie, Regina Klein, Mamie Eisenhower, William Howard Taft, F. A. "Andy" Ketterson, Jr., Harry S Truman, Ron Cockrell, George Porterfield Gates, George Porterfield Wallace, John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Gerald R. Ford, Herbert C. Hoover, Hubert H. Humphrey, Bess W. Truman, Greta Kempton, and Stanley Woodward.

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HSTR INTERVIEW #1990-1

JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Palma Wilson, the chief ranger of Harry S Truman National Historic Site. The interviewer is Jim Williams, a seasonal park ranger at Harry S Truman National Historic Site. The interview is taking place in the superintendent's office at park headquarters on Main Street in Independence, and it's May 15, 1990. This is a continuation of a videotaped interview that we were doing earlier this morning at the Truman home. Could you just begin, Palma, by telling us your full name and birth date again?

PALMA WILSON: [chuckling] Take three. My name is Palma Wilson. My birth date is March 18, 1955. I am originally from Baltimore, Maryland, and I've been with the National Park Service since June of 1977. I currently live in Oak Grove, Missouri, which is about twenty miles east of Independence, and I've been at the Truman home, or at Harry S Truman National Historic Site, since April of 1984. And I'm on my way to Scotts Bluff National Monument as chief ranger.

WILLIAMS: What was your previous experience with the park service before you came to the Truman home?

WILSON: My first park was Assateague Island National Seashore. That was the summer of 1977. I worked as a Student Conservation Association volunteer for the summer, and then worked through the fall as a paid interpreter. I spent three years as a seasonal employee while trying to get on as a permanent, and for those three years the summers were spent at Assateague. I spent one winter working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, which is outside Washington, D.C. I spent the second winter working at Fire Island National Seashore, and the third winter was at the arch in St. Louis.

In April of 1980, I got my first permanent position at Ozark National Scenic Riverways, which is in south central Missouri, down in Shannon County, and I worked as an interpretive naturalist for three years at the Alley Spring subdistrict on the Jacks Fork River, doing cave tours, nature walks, canoe programs, and that kind of thing. In 1982, I transferred to another division, to the resource management and visitor protection division, became a law enforcement ranger, and my duty station at that point was Pulltite ranger station up on the Current River. I spent a year in law enforcement, and then in April of 1984 I transferred to Harry S Truman National Historic Site as a GS-6 lead park ranger.

While I was at the Ozarks, the chief ranger was Norman Reigle, who became the first superintendent of Harry S Truman National Historic Site in October of 1983. And I was also acquainted with Tom Richter, who was the first ranger in charge coming to the area in January of '83, who later became chief ranger. He had worked at the arch in St. Louis when I was there as well. So actually I was kind of recruited to come up and work at the Truman home.

At Norm's going-away party when he left the Ozarks, he approached me saying that he wanted somebody who had some law enforcement background, but also a good interpreter, to come up in the lead position. Actually, I came up for the first time in December of '83 to visit

both Tom and Norm. My husband and I came up at the time, sort of a recruitment trip on Norm's behalf. He took us through the house and that kind of thing, to kind of talk me into applying for the job. When the vacancy announcement for the job did come open later on, I was back in January of '84 to pick up a vacancy announcement, since I was on furlough at the time, and I received word from the park in March of '84 that I would be transferring up. And then we made a house-hunting trip in March—in fact, it was the weekend of the really bad ice storm, which was March 17th of '84—and then officially moved up here in April. But I got to see the house with water coming through the ceilings and things like that with that ice storm back in March.

WILLIAMS: What was your first visit to the home? What do you recall about that?

WILSON: I remember walking in through the back door because we had contract guards at the time, and Norm taking us in and we had to go sign in. And I think the first thing that struck me is what strikes most of our visitors, and that's the green kitchen. I'll be real honest: I was never really fond of the red, white, and blue wallpaper and the green paint. That really never struck me. I think I was struck by how cluttered the house looked at times with everything in there.

And as I mentioned earlier when we did this the second time, I was struck by a resemblance that I had seen with another historic home that I'd worked in, and that was the William Floyd estate up on Fire Island. That house had been in the family for many generations, from the early 1700s on through 1969, and so there was anything from things that had . . . library

books and things that had been back from the middle of the 1700s to Nerf balls. And the Truman home was exactly the same way. You walked up in the attic, and all the clothing and that kind of thing was still there. During that ice storm we went up, and they had started doing some roof work, and because the flashings and whatever were all off, the rain was just pouring through. Tom Richter and Steve Harrison, the first curator, and I were just pulling things out, just trying to get them away from the rain. But it just seemed that it could have been anybody's house, I think, and that's what we've interpreted all along, that it really didn't seem presidential. Coming from a background in Baltimore with a dad that's a history buff, we went to places like Mount Vernon and Monticello and that kind of thing, and that was kind of the image I had of presidential sites, so this didn't seem like a presidential site at all. Of course, I didn't know much about Harry Truman either.

WILLIAMS: When you arrived in April of '84 to enter your position, who was on the staff then?

WILSON: Well, at the time, we had several full-time people. To back up just a little bit, when I made that trip in December of '83, the administrative officer, Joan Sanders, she reported to duty that weekend while I was here. So she was the first here. Prior to that, it had just been Tom and Norm, and then with Joan here, and then there was a Sue Kopczynski, who was on detail from Morristown, was the curator. Around March, Steve Harrison transferred over permanently. And so prior to April 1st, the staffing was: Norm Reigle as superintendent, Tom Richter as chief ranger, Steve

Harrison as the museum curator, Joan Sanders as the administrative technician, and then Lisa Bosso had been hired as a temporary museum aide. Around April 1st the park secretary was hired, that was Jenny Hayes. And then on April 15th everybody else arrived: myself; two other permanent rangers, Cindy Ott and Rick Jones, who later got married that summer; seasonal park rangers Karen Tinnin, Jody Adkins, John Whitfield . . . Linda's last name keeps escaping me. Chrissy Barker came on later on that summer, and Skip Brooks, the facility manager, also came on at that point in time.

And we really had a month just to get the tour together. The plans had been made that the tours were going to go in the front door and out the back door, and the primary theme of the tour was to be the family life of the Trumans. But really there was some research done. Ron Cockrell had come out with his historic structures report, not the resource study but the structures report, so we had that to read. And I remember sitting up here in the office reading that. In fact, we worked on a Saturday and a bunch of us sat up there and read that. Linda Joseph, that was her last name. [chuckling]

But to help us determine what the life was like for the Trumans, we really had to go talk to family members and people who knew the Trumans. And so we were able to set up appointments with Sue Gentry, the newspaper reporter who had covered Mr. Truman, and in fact still writes for the Independence *Examiner*. We spent about an hour or so in her house one morning. We talked to Mrs. Wallace, Mrs. George Wallace—or Aunt May

as we got to call her—who lived right next door to the house, Mrs. Truman's sister-in-law. We spent about an hour or so in her house, and she had some wonderful stories to tell. In fact, that was where we first heard the story about the grandfather clock.

We set up an appointment with Ardis Haukenberry, Mr. Truman's second cousin. She lived in the house across the street, where Harry stayed when he was courting Bess. Mrs. Haukenberry passed away in November of '86. As a little side note, when she passed away the family requested that there be a ranger as a pallbearer. Because the one thing in the last year when she was so sick, the one thing that she could focus on were the kids across the street, the rangers across the street. So Chris Ryan represented the park service and was a pallbearer at that.

In that first month, we also set up an appointment with Liz Safly of the Truman Library. Liz had been one of the folks who the Truman Library had sent in to do the inventory when Bess was so ill in the later years and Margaret was concerned that things might walk out of the house, and so she wanted an inventory done. It was from her that we heard a story about how the Trumans always received these gifts from people all over the country, and one year they received like a case of brandied peaches. And raccoons had gotten into them, and the brandied syrup was like all over everything all up in the attic, and they had to clear that up. And there was animal tracks, and I think even a couple of dead birds or that kind of thing up there.

We also had a chance to talk to some of the archivists, get a tour through the actual archives, and just talk to other people who had been

associated with Mr. Truman. We toured the Truman Library extensively, we toured the Vaile mansion and the Bingham-Waggoner, because not only were we trying to get the tour of the Truman home together, but then we were also trying to get to know other things to see and do in Independence since the shuttle bus we would be working with was going to all those places, and we wanted to promote them as well. We went up to the courthouse to see "The Man from Independence," the thirty-minute program up there, and had one of the employees actually take us up. You can get into the old bell tower and look down. That courthouse was actually built like right over top of the original one, and so you can look down and see the old roofline and that kind of thing. And really just kind of get a good sense of it.

Then it was time to really brainstorm, and the interpreters basically just got together in each room. We just sat and talked about what stories would be appropriate and that kind of thing, then started doing some practice tours, did them with ourselves and did them with folks from the Midwest Regional Office who came down for a day trip. Also did them with some of the volunteers and the Junior Service League people who were going to be working with us.

The first year was kind of unusual. We wanted to give the local folks an opportunity to see the house but not take up time from the people who would be coming in from out of town. So we did set up special advance-reservation evening tours. Most of them were booked up within the first week or so that the reservations opened. The Junior Service

League of Independence provided somebody to help us for gate duty, and we did those tours starting at 5:30 until 8:00. We would do like ten tours in that time. And that got in most of the local folks. And we started those at the end of May, and they went through September or October.

Dedication day was May 12th, and that was the day that kind of made life even more hectic that first month, because not only were we trying to get the tours together but trying to get things together for the dedication. We didn't know who was going to be the primary speaker. Reagan had been invited; he turned us down. Bush had been invited; he turned us down. It ended up just being [Russell] Dickinson, the director of the National Park Service was the keynote speaker. But we had people in from region and that kind of thing, getting everything . . . We had two SET [Special Event Team] teams come in, law enforcement people from all over to help us out. May 12th we took through the folks who were the high muckety-muck dignitaries. They were white ticket holders. May 13th we had special tours through the Junior Service League. Monday the 14th we had ivory-colored ticket holders—they were not quite the high muckety-mucks—and then we actually opened to the public on May 15. That was the first day of public tours. And there was a large group of people standing outside the ticket center that day, waiting to get those first tickets.

WILLIAMS: Mrs. Daniel was here for the dedication.

WILSON: Mrs. Daniel was here. She cut the ribbon at the front gate. I was there with Norm, and then a whole other line of dignitaries, local congressmen, senators, and that kind of thing. And pretty much she walked through the

house, got back into the kitchen and didn't quite like the way something was on one of the tables, and asked the ranger back there—it was Jody Adkins—asked the ranger back there if she could move it. And Jody said, “Yeah, anything you want to do.” [chuckling] Then Mrs. Daniel left, and Jerry Schoeber, who is the superintendent over at the arch, had a car waiting in the back, and she left right after that. So she was very quickly inside the house.

She was not back inside the house again until this year. May 3rd, she took Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor on a very quick tour of the first floor of the house. It lasted maybe twenty minutes at the most. She had some good stories to tell. It was kind of interesting. From the research we've done, some of the things were not quite accurate, but she also had some other neat ones. It was there that we heard that she didn't like the portrait of her father that was done by Jay Wesley Jacobs. She also told us a story about how when she was young her mother nursed her, and didn't have enough milk, and so she had the croup a lot, and her grandmother used to rock her in front of the fireplace in the music room. She told us a story there that she and her Uncle George were the ones that actually put the chandelier together that's in the dining room. And as they were putting it together, there was one little crystal that was missing. And they looked and looked and looked, and couldn't find it, and just thought, well, she'd write the company. And finally they found it back in a corner of the box. She indicated that she was the one who had tacked down the floor in the kitchen, and indeed there were places that she probably had done

that, but the one in particular that she pointed out was one that the park service had actually done. So there were some things that her information was really not quite accurate. But she had said in *Smithsonian World*, when she taped that back with David McCullough in '83, that she would probably never come back inside the house. So we were kind of surprised when she actually did. But I think it was special because of Sandra Day O'Connor being in town. But she was very pleased with how the park service was handling the house, and made a comment to me as she was leaving that we were doing a good job. So that made it all worthwhile.

WILLIAMS: And you were serving as acting superintendent while she was here.

WILSON: Yes, at the time I was, right.

WILLIAMS: What was involved in that month between April 15th and May 14th or 12th, when you had time to prepare the house? What went into . . . ?

WILSON: Well, some of the things that were going on mostly the facility manager was taking care of. They poured new sidewalks because the old ones were cracked and basically a safety hazard. They put down the gray carpeting. We did have some velvet rope theater cords, but we only used them for the dedication. I should mention that when we took those . . . [interview interrupted]

WILLIAMS: We were talking about the preparation for the dedication.

WILSON: I think what I was about to say is that when we took those dignitaries through the day of the opening and then the Monday afterwards, we did stationed interpretation with those. We just had rangers stationed in rooms. And so really the Sunday with the Junior Service League and then starting

that Tuesday, which was six years ago today—we'll talk about that—was when we started the actual formal guided tours.

Around the house, the rangers helped the facility manager to rake the yard and that kind of thing, clean out the rose gardens. Skip worked on getting the roof repairs done, and so then we got the gray carpeting in. The theater cords were used for that stationed interpretation for those first days, and then it really had not been used since then.

WILLIAMS: Who decided to use the gray carpeting and not to have the barriers, and the tour route, and that sort of . . . those decisions?

WILSON: Well, the tour route was pretty much decided by Norm and Tom that we would go in the front door. As far as the gray carpeting and that kind of thing, I'll be real honest, I'm not sure who actually made that decision. I know that there were again, like the William Floyd estate, they had made a decision up there not to use theater cords and plexiglas and that kind of thing, and it seemed like a really good nonintrusive way of keeping people from touching the artifacts. And really, honestly, I don't know who made those decisions.

There was a great deal of emphasis, though, put on during training with us with Steve Harrison about not touching things, because of the oils and acids in our hands, and an emphasis from Skip, who was a safety officer, of some of the safety problems that we were going to encounter. And so what was one of the things the rangers were looking into was the resource management preservation message, the safety messages that were going to be part of the introduction to the tour. And we came up with a list

of things that had to be included in the introduction, and that's now part of the training packet that we give the rangers. We came up with some of the things for the superintendent's orders of like no smoking, eating, drinking, and made those part of the superintendent's compendium, and just kind of got everything ready.

There was such a . . . I don't know, paranoia or whatever about something being taken or something getting broken, that the original decision had been made that there was going to be two rangers on every tour. There would be the front person who would be actually the person doing the tour, and then what we call the trailer position. And that position was basically to watch people as they went through to make sure they didn't touch, make sure nothing got taken, nothing got stolen.

Also when we first opened up, we had four law enforcement commission rangers on staff, myself and Rick Ott-Jones. In the fall of '84, we sent Cindy down to FLETC [Federal Law Enforcement Training Center], and then we reactivated Skip Brooks's commission. And Norm had decided that there had to be a commissioned ranger on site at all times, which kind of got interesting for Rick and I in the summertime. That meant we always had to be around for those Junior Service League tours. But it was just a case of not knowing what was going to happen, and it was better to be overprotected than underprotected. Norm always said it was a lot easier to pull back than it was to kind of tighten regulations. It was a lot easier to loosen up than tighten up. Eventually we discovered . . . Well, the trailer was needed, because going in the front door and out the back there

was a lot of blind spots. Like somebody leading you into the dining room, you couldn't watch what the rest of the group was doing in the foyer, and so the trailer was there to kind of keep back and sort of herd people along.

In the summer of '85 we reversed the route, and we realized that we really didn't need that trailer position, so we discontinued it in late '85. Which kind of freed some people up to give them some prep time and let the permanent rangers that we had on staff get . . . get them involved in projects rather than all they were doing were tours. Because at that time we were not doing fee collection, and so the rangers were pretty strictly just at the Truman home, and eight or nine tours a day, and that was pretty mind-boggling just constantly dealing with them and not really having a break off of it.

Later when Cindy and Rick transferred, and also Skip transferred, they decided that we really didn't need quite the law enforcement coverage, that we really had had no problems. In the six years that we've been operational, nothing has been stolen from the house. And really, very little resource damage has been done. I know we had one winter a visitor broke a thermometer that was on the front porch. We had a couple of rangers hit glass vases that were along the stairwell going into the basement, hit it with their coat. But really, the visitors have been pretty good about keeping with the resource preservation message that they're given.

And I think the other thing that's real important is that we only have eight people per tour. That keeps the groups real limited. They're not crowded. We did try doing nine people per tour in the fall of '85, and the

rangers just really got . . . They felt they couldn't control the group, that there were too many elbows and that kind of thing, and it was too crowded.

So we've been able to keep it at the eight person per tour, and I really think a ranger can really kind of keep their eyes on where hands are and really be able to control their group. If the groups are much larger, I don't think they could do that.

WILLIAMS: What were your primary duties as the lead park ranger?

WILSON: As the lead ranger it really isn't supervisory, but my prime duties were to do the training for all the seasonal rangers and basically be a role model down at the house. I was also the ranking ranger on weekends. So when somebody wanted to complain, I was the one that they yelled at. Being a new park, there was a lot of planning documents, SOPs, that kind of thing that most established parks already had, and so the chief ranger was really involved in doing that. So I really kind of ran the everyday operation. I did all the scheduling for the rangers, did their training, had input into the evaluations. I did audits on their tours and that kind of thing.

In training it was kind of neat to have that trailer position, because when you were trying to train a new ranger they could just slip in there as the trailer and so really have an opportunity to listen to everybody do their tours. And then when they did their first tour, they always had an experienced ranger as a trailer to help them out. So, from a training standpoint, having that trailer position was really, really helpful, but it really was not an efficient use of manpower at all.

In 1986 we had what's called an operations evaluation done at the

park, and they decided that I was doing more than what a GS-6 was supposed to be doing, and they upgraded the position to a GS-7. And at that point I was also given the budgetary responsibilities for the law enforcement program. Since the chief ranger was not commissioned, I was the highest ranking commissioned ranger in the park, and so I at that point took over the security systems. In '85 we had security systems put in. Actually, we got it operational in '86, March of '86. We had new fire detection and intrusion detection systems put in, so that was my responsibility to take care of that.

WILLIAMS: And when did you become chief ranger?

WILSON: Tom Richter was detailed to the arch in St. Louis in October of 1987, for a 120-day appointment, which is essentially four months. The original intention was he was going to come back after that detail, and so they detailed me into the GS-9 chief ranger position here. Tom eventually decided to apply for the job that he had been detailed into, and got that position in January of '88. At that point they issued the vacancy announcement for the GS-9, and Norm told me in March of '88 that he had selected me as the new chief ranger. So I've been chief ranger for the last two years. Then in January of this year, Norm transferred to Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, and the regional office decided that instead of bringing somebody else into an acting superintendency position that they would temporarily promote me to a GS-11 acting superintendent. So from basically January 1 till May the 4th, when Ronald Mack got here, I was the acting superintendent for the park.

WILLIAMS: And what have been your duties as chief ranger?

WILSON: My duties as chief ranger really kind of put me behind a desk more than I like. We were still writing all those documents that never kind of got finished, things like the statement for interpretation, which is how we run the interpretive division, kind of a synopsis of all the programs we've done, handling the budget, again doing training for new employees, audits of their programs, evaluations, basically being a right-hand man to the superintendent, doing a lot of the correspondence that went out here, answering visitor questions, information coming in from the regional office, that kind of thing. I've been involved as the chief ranger on several committees within the city, the special events task force, sometimes sitting in for the superintendent, sometimes just in the capacity of the chief ranger.

Interpretation and visitor services is the largest division in the park. We have eight FTE and a budget of about \$180,000. Most of it is seasonal work, but we have a year-round staff. Since we're not like some other parks that are only busy from Memorial Day to Labor Day, we keep people on year-round because we maintain visitation year-round. And our visitation is averaging around 60,000 a year, if you include actually going through the house. If you include individuals as well as the school groups going through, then it's probably twice, close to 120,000 people who are . . . or double the 60,000, and that includes the people who drive by the house and come into the visitor center to see the slide show and that kind of thing.

WILLIAMS: What happened to the lead ranger position?

WILSON: The lead ranger was kind of abolished when I became the chief ranger. We had reorganized the division, and we decided that we really didn't need the lead position. When Cindy and Rick left the park, we did not fill those permanent positions. We filled them with seasonals. And that really kind of became a pain, because it seemed like every time we turned around a seasonal was leaving, so we had to rehire somebody. So when I became the chief ranger, Norm and I took a look at the division and we decided that we really didn't need another lead or GS-7 because we really needed people to be on the schedule. But we wanted continuity and so it was decided that . . .

We had one permanent ranger still here, and that was Karen Tinnin at the 5 level, and we decided to create two GS . . . or actually three GS-4 subject-to-furloughs, and we filled two of those, one with Brian Hoduski, one originally with Mike Gillespie, and Mike stayed in the position for about three months and then vacated it, and then we filled it with Regina Klein. At the GS-4 level, their primary duties are still doing tours of the house, but they provide a role model and some continuity down in the house. We really don't need another person off the schedule. We need them down there working at the house and working in the ticket center, fee collection, and that kind of thing.

WILLIAMS: What has been the biggest challenge of your six years at the Truman home?

WILSON: It seemed like every year we had some type of little mini-crisis. Of course, the big challenge was just getting open in '84. In '85 we reversed the route. In '86 they reversed the route for the shuttle. In '87, probably something that made life really challenging was the fact that we had to start collecting

fees. Prior to that we had been free. Everybody still had to have a ticket, but we were still free. But Congress told us in '87 that we had to start charging a dollar per person. That meant for the first time that we were going to have rangers in the ticket center, because they had to collect the money, and trying to get the fee collection program set up was a challenge, trying to get everybody coordinated. It meant redoing schedules and that kind of thing to get people both at the home and up in the ticket center without having somebody do more than eight tours a day, because your voice only lasts for about eight tours. At the same time, that year in '87, we also instituted a new interpretive program, the walking tours of the neighborhood. That year was probably the most challenging of all, as far as trying to get everything new started. And we had a lot of bugs to work out of the system, especially with fee collection.

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WILLIAMS: Well, as you leave the park, what do you think will be the biggest challenge for whoever the new chief ranger is?

WILSON: Well, there's a couple things that are on the horizon right now that could make it really challenging but could add some stimulation to the division. One is the possible acquisition of the Truman farm home in Grandview, Missouri. The park service, as directed by our congressman and senators, is in the process of doing a study of management alternatives, and there is a good possibility that the National Park Service will take over that facility that's currently run by the county. I think it would add a new dimension having five acres, even though that's fairly small, but having that house

down there. Right now it's a challenge trying to get school groups through the house. With having all original artifacts, you don't want kids just running ramrod through the house. We've set up an educational group tour where the kids come in and see the slide show, and then there's stationed interpretation through the house. But they really don't get a good insight. I mean, they get some, but they really don't get a good insight into what his life was really like. The park service also has many initiatives, like biological diversity and clean air, and that's really hard to incorporate into a small site when you've only got three-quarters of an acre and you have guided tours that have to be twenty minutes, and that's a really tight span. So having the farm home would give us an opportunity to expand on some of the themes of the park, maybe get into farming life and that kind of thing, and be able to take the kids down there, have five acres where they can run around, and maybe even get into some of the biological diversity and some of the other programs. Where the money and FTE and that kind of thing is going to come from to run the site, who really knows? And it's really going to be up to Congress, but I think that's going to be a real challenge.

This summer the challenge is going to be the fact that we have no shuttle bus. And the neighborhood in which the Truman home is situated is fairly small, I guess you could say. There's limited parking, I guess is the best way to put it. The ticket center itself is about five blocks, and some people will be willing to walk. Doing tours every fifteen minutes and only taking eight people per tour is going to . . . it's not going to be like there's going to be a line outside the house, but the problem is going to come into it

with all the RVs and where are we going to park people. And my real concern from the safety standpoint is that we've gotten some permission from some of the churches to use their parking lots, in particular the First Baptist Church on Truman Road. That means people are going to be crossing Truman Road, and we daily watch people run the stop sign. So from a safety standpoint, that one is going to be real difficult.

And for a new chief ranger coming in, I think just the challenge of keeping the staff fresh. We have a couple interpreters who have been around for several years, and interpreting the Truman home is different than, say, a natural environment. With a natural area, you never know what kind of wildflower is going to come up to bloom and things are going to be different, where the Truman home stays static, and the only thing that keeps your tour fresh are the people who are actually on it. And after you've been doing tours five or six years, that can become pretty old hat. The average age of the visitor at the Truman home is about sixty-five. Those are the people that remember the Trumans and voted for Truman and that kind of thing, and sometimes those people can be a little bit difficult to deal with. So I think that's going to be something that the new chief ranger will find a bit of a challenge.

And just the whole atmosphere of Independence. The city council has changed, the mayor has changed, and that may make things a little bit different for us. Although we're still on the same footing, we're still operating the ticket center as Independence's tourist information center, which is the way we've done it from day one, but things could change, and

that's something that . . .

I think the key word for the staff here has always been *flexibility*, because we never knew from one day to the other how things were going to happen. In October of 1984 they started a restoration of the house, which lasted a year, and we had scaffolding up around the house for almost a year. During the summer of '85, we never knew which door we were going to go into. Sometimes it was the back door, sometimes it was the front door, sometimes the side door, just depending on where we were working. There were days we had to take the groups down the alley because they were working on the chimney and they were afraid mortar was going to fall and that kind of thing. So *flexibility* has been a really key word, and I think that's something, whoever comes in is going to have to maintain that.

We work with a lot of other entities, and that can be a challenge working with another federal agency, National Records and Archives Administration at the Truman Library, working with the city, the county, and then private groups, all in a joint effort for tourism. But our purposes are not always the same. We're more service-oriented than most of the other entities in town, and sometimes our service orientation does not always quite mesh with their promotion-type thing. So there's going to be some real challenges there.

I think the staff that we have here, the permanents, have a real good understanding of the resource and will be able to pass that on to the new chief ranger that comes in. It's pretty rare to have all original artifacts as we go through the house, and I think that's something that our visitors

especially really appreciate, and actually it makes interpretation of the house very easy because the house almost tells its own story.

WILLIAMS: As the chief of interpretation, is there anything that you wish for the visitor to leave the home with?

WILSON: I think that I'd like the visitor to leave the home with the impression that Harry was a real down-to-earth type of person, and I think the house really does that. I hope they've gotten the story and they just haven't . . . As the chief of interpretation, I hope that the interpreters are not object-oriented in their tours, that they're using the objects inside the house to weave a story about the family life inside the home. I would like to think that a visitor can come back and hear from a different ranger hear a different tour, and I think that's primarily the case. We all have our favorite stories, and we tend to use them a lot and they get passed around. But I want the visitor to feel comfortable in the house, and I want them to really kind of get the idea of what Truman was all about, which as I said is just sort of a down-to-earth Midwestern boy. He wasn't anything at all like the . . . probably like our presidents today. He was not one to put on any airs or didn't want to play the games of keeping up with the Joneses. That house is what they were comfortable with. They never changed things. Why change it simply for the sake of change? And I think that's what you see as you walk through it.

I compare it . . . I had an opportunity to visit the Eisenhower farm home in Gettysburg, and I think the thing that struck me there was that the living room Mamie had kind of set up as a museum to the presidential gifts, and all his presidential gifts are sitting there. Or you go back into kind of

their sun room and there's the five-star motif, so you knew that he was president and you knew he was a five-star general. I challenge sometimes the people who come through the Truman home to see even if they can find a presidential seal, because you really have to look for that.

More or less we talked this morning about the front of the house. Those are the family belongings, generations of them, four generations of the family living in the house for the 120 years. Even in the dining room, which is probably the most formal, yes, there is a place setting of the presidential china in the hutch. But the other things in the room are wedding gifts from Mrs. Truman's mother, and silver that had belonged to her mother and grandmother. The first furniture that Harry ever bought for his wife, the dining room table, is sitting there. There's nothing fancy in the house. It's a real family type of thing. And I think people are surprised to see it in some respects, surprised to see that of a president, but when they stop to think about Harry, they're not surprised about it at all.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think you've already answered my last question, which is going to be: You often hear that each unit in the national park system is unique, and I was wondering what you thought the unique thing about the Truman site is?

WILSON: I think, to kind of reiterate, one is the fact that we have all originals, although there are other presidential sites that do have originals, like the Eisenhower farm home, and eventually probably LBJ, we'll get the ranch down there. I think we're unique, in that we were one of the few presidential sites that's doing guided tours and not stationed interpretation. I

know a lot of the other presidential sites have followed our example. The Lincoln home is now using the gray carpeting and that kind of thing the way we have, limiting the use of plexiglas. I think visitors appreciate the guided tours where they have an opportunity to hear what was [unintelligible] rather than just kind of walking through, which is something that doesn't happen in a lot of other sites.

We're a small site, but expanding. And that's going to be another challenge for management, both the chief ranger and the new superintendent, is the acquisition of the three houses in the neighborhood, and what are we going to use those for. I'm hoping that one of the houses will be required occupancy for a law enforcement ranger, the Haukenberry house across the street be visitor site support. There's no rest room facilities or a place for folks to get out of the rain or that kind of thing. There's going to be exhibit planning done that the chief ranger will have to do. But it's just a house that's easy to interpret, and I think that makes it unique too in its own way.

We're also unique that we got open a lot quicker than most places did, and that was because of the fact that they wanted the house open for the centennial, Mr. Truman's centennial in 1984. We were declared a national park by Congress in May of '83, and we opened in May of '84. You look at a lot of other sites. Whitehaven, which is Grant's farm up in St. Louis, is a good example. It will probably be several years before that house is open to the public. William Howard Taft is another one that took a while to get open. So we were unique in getting open really quickly. I think being

close to the regional office, we got a lot of support from them, especially from the cultural resources shop, Andy Ketterson and all those folks, and the support is still coming in. You know, as far as cataloging the objects and that kind of thing that we have in the house, the forty-eight thousand objects in the house.

WILLIAMS: Thank you.

WILSON: Any time.

* * * *

[The following is the transcript of a sample tour of the Truman home that Wilson gave the morning of May 15, 1990.]

WILSON: [Living room] That is the grandfather clock that's over in the corner. According to family legend, and this was also I think documented by Ron Cockrell, the clock was made in England in 1732, and was made of apple wood, and belonged to Grandfather Gates. They had possession of it when they were in Vermont, and then he brought it when they wound up finally out to Independence. It's probably one of the oldest things in the house.

Now, what makes it an interesting story to tell the visitors is that back when Margaret was a teenager, we understood there was a party and something happened to the hands on the grandfather clock and they were broken. Mrs. George Wallace told us that her husband, who we refer to as Uncle George, said that he would fix the hands on the grandfather clock. So the Trumans, instead of taking it to a reputable clock repair shop, had Uncle George take care of it. And according to Miss May, her husband went into her kitchen, got out an old pie tin, cut the hands out of the bottom

of the pie tin and painted them black, and that's what's on there as hands today, hands out of the bottom of a pie tin.

Now people will often ask us why is it stopped at almost a quarter, ten till one, and it's not that that's any specific time. It's just that Uncle George got his hands on the grandfather clock once again and took out all of the mechanical workings and made it electrical. And the wiring on it is so poor that we won't plug it in.

The portrait over the mantle was done by Jay Wesley Jacobs, and that was Mrs. Truman's favorite portrait of her husband. She always said that any of the other portraits of Harry Truman could go anywhere, in any museum or that kind of thing, but this one would always stay here. We understood that Mrs. Truman always sat in the gold chair, and so from there she had a good vantage point to look at the picture of her husband as well as the pictures of her four grandsons that are on the mantle. When Margaret Truman Daniel was here in the house last week on May 3rd, she indicated that she didn't like that portrait of her father. Her mother did, but she didn't care for it at all.

We know that the Secret Service used to come in and sleep on the couch in the later years when Bess was sleeping in the downstairs bedroom here. Some people say that is one of the reasons why the couch was so lumpy. The Secret Service spent a lot of time there. And this would have been the room where all the dignitaries and VIPs would have been entertained by the Trumans. Six presidents of our country have sat on the couch: Kennedy, Nixon, Johnson, Carter, Ford, Herbert Hoover. Hubert

Humphrey. President Reagan was invited into the house when he was here for his Labor Day speech in 1985, '86? I can't remember which.

WILLIAMS: Eighty-five, '86.

WILSON: Whatever. Thank you. [chuckling] But he was on a real tight schedule. It wasn't an election year, was it? I missed '86. Whatever. Anyway, he didn't have enough time in his forty-five-minute schedule to come on in.

We get questions quite often about the magnifying glass that's on the table next to the little chair there. A lot of women especially question whether or not Bess would have used it for needlepoint. Bess was not handy with a needle, according to Margaret. That magnifying glass was probably used to read. Margaret tells us that when she was a little girl, that if she tore her dress or whatever, she would take it to her grandmother to have it fixed rather than to her mother, because her mother just didn't sew.

And we'll often get questions about the portraits on the walls, which are of Margaret and her two oldest sons. Really, people ask that more when they've seen the slide show.

WILLIAMS: We are now in the foyer, and of course the centerpiece is Margaret's portrait.

WILSON: When we first started doing tours of the Truman home back in 1984, visitors came in the front door, so the portrait of Margaret was the first thing that they probably saw. We switched that in the summer of '85, to bring visitors in through the back door. But it's something that people could see that Mr. Truman was quite proud of his daughter. The portrait of Margaret was done back in 1947 by Greta Kempton, and that's the gown

that she wore in her debut performance out in California at the Hollywood Bowl, her light opera singing career. She says in the *Smithsonian World* tape that her father told her if she got a college education he would back her in anything she wanted to do. She got a degree in history, then went on to singing. The piano that's in the background of that portrait was in the White House. It's not the piano that we have here.

I only heard tapes of Margaret sing. I've never heard her sing. I've heard people say she was good but not great. And I really think that she got more criticism for her singing than she probably deserved, only because Dad was such a father . . . kind of a doting father, and was known to make comments back to the critics. In fact, he told one critic that he was going to need a beefsteak for his eye because he was going to punch him out.

I often like to say that Margaret got her singing career started when she was eight years old. That was when her father bought her the piano in that room [music room]. Do you want to do that, too? When Margaret was eight years old, she asked Santa Claus to bring her an electric train set. That was *the* toy to have that year, and unfortunately Santa Claus didn't listen to her. He brought her a Steinway baby grand instead. From what we've heard, Margaret came down the stairs, or was brought down the stairs that morning—I understand she was sick that Christmas—and she looked underneath the piano and on top of the piano and around the piano for the train set, and never got a train set.

I think Mr. Truman bought the piano because he himself liked to play it. He had been taught to play by his mother when he was about four

and a half, five years old, and at one point he thought his career was going to be as a concert pianist. But other things happened and he had to go find other work, and he was not able to continue his musical studies.

A misconception, or a piece of misinformation that got passed around about Mr. Truman, is everybody thought that the “Missouri Waltz” was his favorite song, and actually he detested it. He equated the “Missouri Waltz” and the tune to the “Star Spangled Banner” together. He didn’t like that piece of music at all. And he really preferred classical music. Chopin and Mozart were his favorite composers. But Mr. Truman was such a gentleman, that had you asked him to play it he probably would have. And if you played it for him, if he recognized it, he probably would have been really appreciative. Although he didn’t quite recognize it when President Nixon played it. He was heard to comment, “What is he trying to play?” or something like that.

WILLIAMS: Did they watch much TV? [laughter]

WILSON: Good question. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: A frequent one.

WILSON: A frequent question. I usually answer that question by saying, “Well, just look at the placement of the TV in this room. This is really how we found it.” As you look around the room, there’s really no good place to sit and watch the television. In fact, if you ask the kids, they’ll normally say that they would sit on the floor. But I can’t picture Harry and Bess Truman sitting on the floor to watch television. Mr. Truman probably watched things like news and politics and his daughter Margaret, that was about it.

He said that watching TV hurt his eyes, and he'd rather sit and read a good book than watch television.

Now Bess, on the other hand, did like to watch sports. In the 1955 *Person to Person* she's asked about watching professional wrestling matches on TV, and we also know she liked to watch baseball. I believe it was in Ron Cockrell's book, or one of the other books on Bess, there was a newspaper reporter that was supposed to have an interview with her, and he called her up just to double-check. She indicated that she couldn't make the interview, and he could hear in the background that there was a ball game on, and I think it was during the World Series or something like that. But baseball was more important. In fact, even when Margaret got married in 1956, a couple days before the wedding Bess and some of her relatives were cleaning the house, because the reception was held here on the grounds, and Bess was kind of grumbling. One of her cousins said, "Well, why are you grumbling? You should be happy because Margaret's getting married." And Bess said, "Yes, she had 365 days of the year to get married on, why did she have to pick opening day of baseball season?" So baseball was real important to her.

The portrait of Bess that hangs in the music room is the original first lady portrait that was done in 1952, also by Greta Kempton. It was supposed to stay in the White House, but for some reason the White House staff packed it up and sent it home with the Trumans, and they kept it. Later on, copies were made to hang both in the White House and in the Truman Library. The original stayed here. Greta Kempton had actually

come back to town to ask Mrs. Truman to pose for another portrait, and originally Mrs. Truman had agreed. But Greta really got the impression that Bess was not real happy about doing it, so they made the agreement that she would just make a copy. Bess still had the dress hanging in the attic, and she went to the attic and got the dress. The dress and the painting went back to Miss Kempton's studio and the copy was made.

The chandelier that hangs in the music room here is an original gas fixture to the 1885 addition to the house. From what I understand via the park service people who were here in the house when it first opened, the gas was still connected to it when we first came in. Which is one of those wonderful safety hazards that we had to take care of immediately. But it is the only gas fixture left.

We get a lot of questions about the tiling around the fireplace, and there's really not a real good answer to that. We don't know where it came from. We do know that in the '50s when the Trumans were going through a modernization period, there were several tiles that were cracked and needed to be repainted, and Mrs. Truman was able to find an Italian artisan who was able to repaint those and get them in good shape, but that was about it.

That is a wood-burning fireplace. It's just a cover that's on the front of it. At one point, and I'm not sure whether it was in '84, right before we opened or not, but Steve Harrison, the curator at the time, opened that up, and there were pieces of paper in there that had been partially burned. It looked like bills and things like that, but we really couldn't put a date on it.

The gong that's on the fireplace is a source of interest for a lot of visitors. Really, we didn't know a lot about that until about two years ago. And that is like a Far Eastern type of gong. The silk settee across the way is something that probably belonged to Mrs. Truman's mother.

WILLIAMS: What about that painting above the television?

WILSON: Ah, the painting above the television. That painting is entitled *The Donkey at Key West*. Mr. Truman's chief of protocol, and I can't remember the gentleman's name, I can never remember the gentleman's name . . .

WILLIAMS: Stanley Woodward.

WILSON: His son, Mr. Woodward's son, was a budding artist, I guess you could say. And Mr. Truman, to help the kid out, decided he would buy two of his paintings for \$150. And Bess was to decide which one she wanted to keep here in the house, and she kept *The Donkey at Key West* here, and the other one went up to the Truman Library. We often get asked by visitors if Margaret did that as a child or something like, or refer to it as *the paint-by-numbers picture*.

WILLIAMS: I think we're unfortunately out of time. So, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW